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ABSTRACT

Despite the open-door policies of community colleges, studies have shown that minorities and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds graduate and transfer at lower rates than students from higher socioeconomic groups. To examine the interplay between institutional culture, ideology, and socio-historical forces shaping student perspectives and behaviors, interviews were conducted with students at a small, rural community college in the southeastern United States. The county in which the college is located had a population of approximately 76,000 (68% White and 31% African American) and which had a wide disparity in income. Although the attitudes of the faculty and staff were generally positive and caring and the quality of teaching was considered good by students, retention, graduation, and transfer data indicated that developmental students were particularly susceptible to academic failure. The interviews revealed that these students were often poorly prepared for college-level academic work and resented being forced to take courses that repeated their high school curriculum. Also, developmental courses were often overcrowded and offered few opportunities for teacher-student interaction. Other factors not related to the college were the lack of encouragement for lower socioeconomic students from families and the tendency of high school personnel to track them into non-academic vocational programs. To effectively serve all students, colleges must go beyond providing access and examine curricula, instructional approaches, and assessment practices in order to reduce differences among the diverse student body. (Contains 20 references.) (KP)

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# Class, Culture and Ideology in a Rural Community College: A Report to the Spencer Foundation

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The community college has enjoyed the reputation as the most egalitarian of higher education institutions. That distinction is based on the mission of community colleges to provide higher educational opportunities to the masses of American people. Open admission policies, the relatively low cost, and proximity to most communities in the U.S. ensures access to higher education to people who ordinarily would not attend college. These policies have enhanced the community college's reputation as democracy's college.

Despite the apparent openness of community colleges, critics have pointed out that minorities and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds show substantially lower rates of graduation or transfer to four year institutions than students from upper socioeconomic groups (Astin, 1977; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Karabel, 1972; Tinto, 1973). Other critics have examined the community college's role in determining a student's position in the economic order (Clark, 1970; Pincus, 1980; 1986; Richardson & Bender, 1987; Zwerling, 1976; 1986). These authors argue that community colleges channel working class students into vocational or other terminal programs, in effect preserving higher status positions for upper socioeconomic students while those students judged to be less capable are tracked toward lower status positions. From this perspective, the community colleges serve society by reproducing the social order, assuring that elite students enter into positions of power and prestige and lower ability students are tracked into working class jobs.

Related studies in the political economy and sociology of knowledge have examined the role of schooling in distributing knowledge to students. These authors have argued that even in a society where class structure is relatively fluid as in the U.S., students of different social class backgrounds are exposed to qualitatively different types of educational knowledge (Karabel & Halsey, 1977; Apple, 1979; Young and Whitty, 1971). According to Bourdieu

and Passeron (1977) schools play an important function in determining what type of knowledge is privileged or high status. The schools classify students based on the possession of this high status knowledge and reproduce the number of people roughly equivalent to the division of labor in society. From this view, schools become an active force in preserving the economic and social system of the country.

Critical Perspectives

A critical study of community college education would urge attentiveness to the institutional arrangements and practices of the school and the impact on nontraditional students. The arrangements and practices of present day community college education reflect a tradition influenced by modernist perspectives. In other words, activities such as teaching for objectives, systematic instruction, standardized assessment, and bureaucratic organization are ingrained in the practices and policies of the schools (Cherryholmes, 1990; Rendon, 1993). Traditionalists defend the system based on their perception that schools are value-free, and assume that all students can learn the same materials in the same way and that a uniform, universal measure can serve to assess student learning (Giroux, 1986). The outcome is that students are compared, treated, classified and sorted all in the name of fairness and objectivity (Cherryholmes, 1990). Traditionalists proclaim that testing ensures that standards are being maintained and a metritocratic system is being preserved to allow students an opportunity for equal education. The argument of course, assumes that students have been playing on a level ball field and that all groups, regardless of where they go to school have an equal chance to learn. Sociologists of education during the 1970s and 1980s began to challenge the supposed neutrality of schooling and examined schools as political

institutions. Discussions about policies such as curriculum or textbook choices were linked to issues of power and control in society. The crucial question that emerged from these investigations was the way power was distributed in society, and its impact on the status of particular groups and social classes (Young & Whitty, 1972).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) maintained that schools were an important social and political force in the process of class reproduction. Schools play a particularly important role in both legitimating and reproducing the dominant culture especially at the levels of higher education. Bourdieu and Passeron explained that the skills, knowledge, and modes of communication associated with college going behavior are given status by the dominant groups in society and are transformed into cultural capital that may be used by upper socioeconomic groups to their advantage. The students' display of cultural and social resources results in differential treatment in education. Schools and colleges reward students based on their ability to call upon their cultural resources and further, teachers communicate more easily with students from elite groups, give them more attention, and perceive of them as more intelligent.

The institution's preference for a particular type of knowledge, culture or discourse can be understood when the power relationships in society are taken into consideration. Foucault (1977) explained that power focuses on asymmetrical relationships in which some people are rewarded and indulged, and others are rebuked. As an example, schools invoke their power by advocating particular types of practices, such as the selection of textbooks or standards necessary for graduation. Students recognize that the standards are necessary for success and attempt to conform to the beliefs and values of the dominant group. If students

do not master the standards as relfelcted in the texts or discourse approved by the institution, negative judgements may be made about the student.

The emphasis in this study considers the relationships that are established between students and the faculty and staff at the community or college. I examined the interplay between the culture, ideology, and the sociohistorical forces that shape people's perspectives, values, and behaviors, and the culture and traditions of a community college. In the end, the purpose of the study was to understand the decisions people made about their education and career paths.

Changes in Plans

I initially proposed to examine two community colleges, one urban and one rural to conduct a comparitive analyses of the two colleges. As the study progressed, I decided to concentrate on one of the colleges. Several factors led to my decision to concentrate on the rural college. As I was gathering data, it became apparent that the differences between the students at the two colleges were superficial and it seemed to be a better use of resources to concentrate on one college rather than two. Another factor was the lack of research that has been conducted on rural community colleges. Because of the lack of attention on rural community colleges, society tends to ignore the social, economic, and educational problems that are common to rural communities. I believed that a report on a rural community college, considering the importance of the institution to minority and lower socioeconomic students, would make a greater contribution to the field of education.

The Case Study

The setting for this case study was a community college in the southeastern United

States. The community college is located in a small rural county in a largely rural state. The population of the county is approximately 76,000, with Whites comprising 68 percent of the population and African Americans 31 percent. There is a small but growing Latino population in the county, the majority of whom are agricultural workers. There is wide disparity in income in the county, with a large number of African Americans either unemployed or employed in low skill and low paying service or manufacturing jobs. The median family income for whites in the county is approximately $37,000, compared with the median family income of $19,500 for African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Findings

Students come to the community college with high degrees of ambition and aspirations to learn the skills they need to attain a higher position in society. Many of the students I interviewed came from modest backgrounds and were seeking a better position in life. Some of the students had been in the workforce and many of them found that their opportunities were limited with a high school diploma and few marketable skills. The students believed that the community college was the place where they could develop the necessary skills to make them competitive as future workers. Many students recognized several advantages in attending the community college. The school was small and it was relatively easy for students to meet and interact with faculty. The attitudes of the faculty were generally positive and caring, and the quality of the teaching was considered good by the students. Certainly the components for student success were there, but it was not reflected in the retention, graduation, or transfer rates of the college. Developmental students were particularly susceptible to academic failure for several reasons. For one, many of them were

poorly prepared academically. For a variety of reasons they had difficulty in high school and did not take the courses needed to prepare them for college level work. Upon admission to the community college these developmental students were required to take a series of courses that in effect repeated their high school curriculum. Many of the students resented taking these courses. Some of the students felt that the placement test had not been a fair indicator of their ability to do the work and they felt as if they were wasting their time in these developmental courses.

Even though the quality of teaching was considered to be good in the college, the developmental courses were often overcrowded and students had difficulty getting help from the instructor. Often the developmental courses were organized as independent learning courses, and teacher interaction was rare. In the math course I observed, students would work independently at their desk and solve problems. At regular intervals the students would take tests to determine if they had mastered the material. There were few opportunities for students and teachers to interact in the classroom.

The low retention of the developmental students cannot be attributed soley to the practices of the community college. If blame is to be distributed it must be shared by all levels of the educational system. Developmental studies students come largely from working class or lower socioeconomic backgrounds and never had the benefit of teachers or counselors who encouraged their academic efforts. Their own families, lacking what Bourdieu called cultural capital, could not provide the direction or support the students needed for making decisions about their futures. When these students depended upon the school personnel to help guide them, the advice did not always enable them to make the most

beneficial decisions for their futures.

Developmental students are at a distinct disadvantage when they enter community colleges. Because of poor preparation or misguided advice, these students must cross numerous barriers before they are allowed to into the mainstream curriculum. Despite the good intentions of the community college, the system of developmental studies may be contributing to the reproduction of society with lower socioeconomic groups being tracked into nonacademic programs, preserving higher status majors for the more well-prepared student. The problem that arises in this system is that a high proportion of minorities and nontraditional students in the developmental programs are tracked away from high status majors and consequently their opportunities for social mobility are limited.

Policy Implications

The community colleges enroll a high proportion of students who require academic remediation. For some students a refresher course in math or English is all that is needed, but for others their academic problems are more extensive. Whatever the level of remediation required, the implications for community college education are clear. The community college must examine their role in the education system and develop policies that go beyond merely providing access to higher education to minorities and other nontraditional students. Emphasis needs to be placed on examining curricula, instructional approaches, assessment practices, institutional organization and the relationship of these practices with the values, traditions, and strengths of a diverse student body. Up to now, community colleges have not been successful in dealing with the diversity of students. Some might argue that the colleges have not been celebrating diversity, but have been working toward homogenizing

their student body by reducing differences. The rhetoric of the community college has often been that "all students are treated the same." This practice, entrenched throughout the educational system, may not be the answer. The colleges must take into consideration the fact that students from varying backgrounds exhibit knowledge in a variety of ways. By applying traditional teaching methods and current evaluation and assessment practices, the colleges may not be allowing students to demonstrate what they know.

The community college must also examine the priorities they place on students services. Because of the number of minority and nontraditional students who are in need of remedial education, the colleges must think seriously about their allocation of resources. The commitment of resources into the area of student services, and an examination of current institutional practices and policies, would reaffirm the community college's role as "democracy's college."

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